Gaslit:

how nature, both out- and inside of us,

plots our collective insanity

Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer in the 1944 film *Gaslight*

For purposes of this discussion, "to gaslight" is to manipulate the frames of reference and leverage the weakness of cognitive function to its detriment. The idea is usually employed with the assumption that the manipulator has agency. This is not necessary. A mirror is capable of it.

"No one gets smarter under stress.
The question, really, is who gets dumb faster."[1]
—Charles Morgan, forensic psychiatrist, University of New Haven

"Do you remember when we used to go to cafés...?"
—Silvia Camporesi, bioethicist, King's College London

How may philosophy help with existential crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic? Aren't responses to crises of this sort best implemented by legitimate political authority, guided by scientific understanding?

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[1] "Why Humans Totally Freak Out When They Get Lost: People really do circle past the same tree over and over again—it doesn't just happen in movies." Michael Bond, *Wired*, May 13, 2020.

Biomedicine is in the best position to tell us about the nature of this virus, about its dangers and the most rational *medical* measures to take in response to them. Economists and historians are in the best position to tell us what to expect in the way of collateral costs from those measures. Contrary to what is sometimes heard, every kind of human reaction has been elicited many times before. Little is new.

What does philosophy offer?

There is a branch of applied ethics that considers threats to our species or civilizational existence. It is dominated by the application of decision theory in the face of existential risks. Whether the threat comes from nuclear annihilation, climate change, runaway AI, nanotechnologies, or chemical or genetically-engineered biological agents, or whatever threat is preceded by sufficient time to consider options, these thinkers have long worried over what to do when scenarios realized from science fiction—or merely events in the normal course of nature—threaten to wipe us or our civilizational accomplishments out.[2]

Our only defense against such eventualities, so they believe, is to approach these threats through the use of *rational decision-making*, the most potent tool of our species. Enjoining a measure of rigor in the reasoning behind our decisions is hardly a new precept but shockingly scarce when real crises strike. Existential risk philosopher H. Orri Stefánsson, in particular, thinks we have not been expressing anything like the full range of our capability in this regard. Specifically, we have not been doing three things well:

1. Facing hard trade-offs,
2. Evaluating expert advice, and
3. Avoiding fallacious application of an otherwise benign rule known as the "precautionary principle"

We will look at these failings as discussed by Stefánsson and others in detail.

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In the course of this investigation, we will also be led to ask: Why are we so miserably incompetent at rational decision-making under pressure? What predisposes us against being rational in a crisis? And are *collectives* any more immune to failing at this than individuals? Or are their mistakes proportional to their numbers? Are *experts* any more immune? Or is their advice as error-prone as the next person's when not precisely circumscribed by the boundaries of their expertise? What, if anything, can we do about being so easily taken in by all that conspires against us? Conspiracies do not require agents. A set of circumstances suffice... And what does "gaslighting" have to do with it? What is gaslighting, who or what does it, who are its vulnerable targets, and why?

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[2] We may call it the "ethics of emergencies," to borrow a phrase from Ayn Rand, though she meant something different by it.

[This topic has a theme song: Be Calm.]

Reason against nature

Our rational capabilities are among our most recent evolutionary acquisitions. They still are not "second nature." We have to give ourselves pause to use them. Add dire conditions and their use is further handicapped. We don't think straight in emergencies. We are subject to all manner of fallacious thinking and psychological biases.

We panic. We react to what we see immediately before us. And often to *only* what is immediately before us. When lost unexpectedly, we go in circles, sometimes with fatal consequences. Or we draw conclusions from what we see that are exactly the reverse of those we should draw if only we paused to consider all that we know and don't know.

Lost

Yes, it's true. People walk in circles when lost in the woods. There's science behind it. Without a landmark, you might as well be blind-folded. You think you are walking straight but you veer in circles.

"A Mystery: Why Can't We Walk Straight?" *NPR* Robert Krulwich, 2010.

See "Why Humans Totally Freak Out When They Get Lost: People really do circle past the same tree over and over again—it doesn't just happen in movies." Michael Bond, *Wired*, May 13, 2020.

Instead of pausing, thinking, assessing the situation and basing our plan of action on the best information we have, we are compelled *to do something*, move, walk—as far as we know—randomly. Doing *nothing* is often more rational than an ill-considered *something*. And one would think that groups of people would not be so afflicted by this bias, but not so. Groups follow leaders. Leaders are individuals. The best of these leaders have to be extraordinary in their rational capabilities to not succumb to this "do something" counterproductive bias. But the "best" are almost by definition extraordinary, not common. And there is no correlation between excelling at rational decision-making *for all-concerned* and being a leader. Sadly. So, under such leadership, groups panic just like individuals. And the sad consequences of their confused decisions scale to match the group size.[3]

Absent real "critical thinking" (not to be confused with the popular use of the phrase which amounts to being critical of someone else's *thinking) or a rational plan, do we think as straight as we walk? Apparently, so. That is, not much.*

In the case of thinking, the analogue of being blind-folded is being presented with an apparently novel threat. A novel coronavirus, let's say...

Is it any different with groups of people? Consider, for example, reports from a few years ago that U.S. Embassy workers in Cuba had experienced "sonic attacks" of some mysterious sort causing them psychological and possibly neural damage. One worker reported hearing strange sounds, headaches, inability to concentrate, hearing loss, and various other symptoms. Initial medical exams found nothing. But there was insecurity in the air. After all, this was in the middle of an historic opening of relations between Cuba and the U.S. Trump had just been elected. The country was ripe for conspiracies. It was shaken.[4] Might the Russians, via the Cubans, trained a new secret sonic weapon at Americans causing brain damage at a distance? (Surely, the Cubans could not be *that* sophisticated. After all, the U.S. military had been trying to develop such weapons, themselves, for decades without much success.)

Then more workers started presenting with similar symptoms, the embassy was shut down. Its occupants underwent a battery of tests and examinations by the best experts the U.S. government could muster. Cuban doctors also investigated (but who could trust them?), other experts around the world got involved... Two years later, after exhaustive investigation by medical, defense, and psychological experts, the consensus—American, Cuban, and international—was nothing, no evidence of a sonic attack. A recording of the sound some were hearing that sounded like crickets chirping was analyzed and turned out to be crickets chirping. There is no evidence of anyone going mad from hearing crickets chirping.

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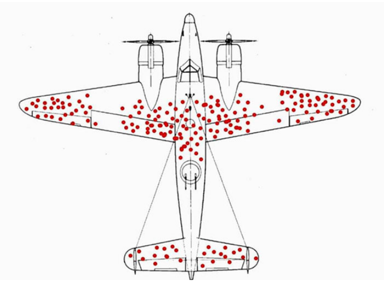
[3] "The Real Story Behind the Havana Embassy Mystery: U.S. officials say dozens of diplomats in Cuba were felled by a sonic 'attack.' But the likeliest culprit is far less futuristic—and much more terrifying." Jack Hitt, *Vanity Fair* January, 2019. See also, "'Sonic Weapon Attacks' on U.S. Embassy Don't Add Up—for Anyone: Cuban scientists and a new American report both shoot down a list of bizarre theories," Douglas Fields, *Scientific American*, February 16, 2018. The point here is that major organs of the mainstream news media, such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were enlisted in promulgating essentially an hysterical story with precious little evidence. Group insecurity primes belief. And this before the politics.

[4] On both sides of the political spectrum. On the left: how could Trump have won? On the right: weren't they out to get him?

Primed and insecure, we—not just as individuals but collectively—are prone to delusions.[5]

Survivor bias

Nature has set us up—for likely very good evolutionary reasons—to attend to the evidence before our eyes. This must work most of the time, or we wouldn't be here. Except for when it doesn't, which fortunately, is less frequent. Nevertheless, when that happens, we are not prepared and are subject not just to acting randomly, as when lost, but perversely in the full face of logic. Then, we infer the exact opposite of what we should be inferring. Thus, "Survivor bias," (a particularly flagrant variant of "selection bias") causes us to make not merely useless decisions but counterproductive ones.



During World War II, Allied military commanders sought to minimize the loss of bombers returning from missions. It occurred to them to count the bullet holes and their locations on returning planes to look for patterns. They found them. Most planes returned with more holes in the center fuselage, wings, and tail than in the nose, engine, rear fuselage, and cockpit areas. Those are the areas, they concluded, that needed shielding or reinforcement. Statistician Abraham Wald disagreed. Those areas were exactly the ones not to bother with. After all, the planes they were scrutinizing were the ones that *returned*. It is the planes struck in *other* places, precisely the planes they were *not* seeing and whose holes and their locations they were *not* counting, that offered a clue as to where these planes needed extra shielding.

We see a *new* pathogen and cannot avert our eyes from the number of those dying from it. We resolve to act to protect *everyone* from this threat. We discount what we *also* could infer from the evidence before our eyes: that *most* people infected with this virus are *not* dying. Shouldn't the correct inference be to target isolation measures knowing, *as we must have known after a moment's thought*, what the price would be of not targeting isolation measures at the most vulnerable, but, instead, at everyone?

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[5] Philosophical aside: yes, it is possible that there was, indeed, a sonic weapon. That's a *logical* possibility. But is it a *rational* one? No. What is rational constrains possibility with probability. The probable is only a subset of the logical. It is a mistake to conflate them. No one outside of philosophers arguing, takes *pure logical possibility* as indicative of evidence for any action or conclusion. It is logically possible you can leap high enough to land on the moon. You know the probabilities...

We see the evidence of immediate and palpable harm—people dying before our eyes—and cannot seem to infer the greater harm of the thing we resolve to do about it.

On Survivor bias:
https://youtu.be/ZyLVIvBidIA

Resources:

"Three Mistakes in the Moral Reasoning About the Covid-19 Pandemic," H. Orri Stefánsson, Institute for Future Studies.

"It didn't have to be this way: A bioethicist at the heart of the Italian coronavirus crisis asks: why won't we talk about the trade-offs of the lockdown?," Silvia Camporesi, bioethicist, King's College London.

H. Orri Stefánsson

https://www.iffs.se/en/publications/working-papers/three-mistakes-in-the-moral-reasoning-about-the-covid-19-pandemic/

"...three related failings in moral reasoning: First, a **failure to realize that trade-offs** are unavoidable when it comes to public decisions; second, a **failure by public officials to weigh individual interests**; third, a **mistaken application of the notorious "precautionary principle"**. Moreover, as I further discuss in the concluding section, all three failures have a common source, namely, the lack of holistic (or all-things-considered) reasoning." — Stefánsson

1. **Trade-offs: failure to explicitly consider them.** The tendency to give more weight to identifiable persons suffering over those less present: "out of sight, out of mind." E.g., the interests of the dying infected person before you versus the child whose future will be crippled as the consequence of the lockdown. We think we can avoid tradeoffs by

flattening the curve, while ignoring that many will suffer through the measures taken to flatten it.

2. **Public officials are too easily abdicating their responsibility to adjudicate between experts**. These have the job of giving us the facts to the best of their ability, but it is not the experts who must decide policy. That responsibility belongs to elected officials who presumably reflect the collective will of the people.
3. The **precautionary principle** is the idea that when faced with a possible grave threat it is always better to be safe than sorry. Following this principle blindly can lead to worse calamities than those it seeks to avoid.
4.

http://orristefansson.is/

The fallacy of trust » IAI TV

Notes

https://theconversation.com/market-bubbles-and-sonic-attacks-mass-hysterias-will-never-go-away-87493

"It didn't have to be this way: A bioethicist at the heart of the Italian coronavirus crisis asks: why won't we talk about the trade-offs of the lockdown?," Silvia Camporesi, King's College London. Quotes below:

"When confronted with epidemiologists' models showing that particular measures will save X number of lives, it's hard for politicians not to implement them – especially if other countries are already doing so. Saving lives in the short term by shielding the healthcare system and flattening the curve of infections is obviously a vital goal. However, it cannot be the only one. The social lockdown has very real economic and mental health repercussions for large sections of the population. The damage and deaths it causes will be more difficult to quantify than those directly caused by COVID-19, but they will still exist. As the Italian statistician Maurizio Bettiga has argued, this isn't just a scientific question, but also a moral one about which values we should prioritise.

There's no such thing as a value-free model."

“Younger generations have been asked to make huge sacrifices for older generations, with the expectation of only very limited benefits for their own health – and some big repercussions for their own physical and mental wellbeing, including the closure of universities and loss of opportunities to work. This is also the generation that will have to pay off the bulk of debts we’re now accruing to pay for government assistance packages.”

“near-total shutdown of the clinical trial industry, ”

“*Do you remember when we used to go to cafés…?*”

from: https://aeon.co/essays/a-bioethicist-on-the-hidden-costs-of-lockdown-in-italy

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“We have evolved to pay attention to immediate threats. We overestimate threats that are less likely but easier to remember, like terrorism, and underestimate more complex threats, like climate change.” from: https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190304-human-evolution-means-we-can-tackle-climate-change

An analogy: the apparent immediate effects of the virus: the thought that you might get sick today and be dead 7 to 14 days later is an existential threat that seizes our concern and attention. Like terrorism. The more distant, vaguer, more diffused, but real damage to social, economic, political institutions and the life these support associated with poorly thought out strategies such as indiscriminate lockdown is like climate change. It is not going to hurt us in two weeks. Ergo, we can ignore it.

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“‘Sonic Weapon Attacks’ on U.S. Embassy Don’t Add Up—for Anyone: Cuban scientists and a new American report both shoot down a list of bizarre theories,” Douglas Fields, *Scientific American*, February 16, 2018.